

Comment: Patriots And Traitors

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Serbia's cultural elite finds itself in the firing line as the Milosevic government steps up its scare-mongering campaign ahead of the September elections

Rooting out subversives and spies has become something of an obsession in Serbia. Almost every day new groups and individuals are exposed, some from abroad, but many from within the Yugoslav federation itself. Over the past months independent journalists and members of non-governmental organisations have found themselves the prime targets. But in recent weeks leading figures from the art world have also come under fire.

The seven-year sentence handed down to journalist Miroslav Filipovic, tried before a military court for espionage, was clearly designed to intimidate independent journalists in the run-up to next month's presidential elections. Filipovic's castigation fitted perfectly the two chief stereotypes pedalled by the state propaganda machine - foreign conspiracy and the "spy among us."

Not content with intimidating the media, the regime has now turned on artists, theatre writers, film directors, screen writers, authors, indeed anyone from Serbia's cultural life, whom the government doesn't like.

The Radical Party of Vojislav Seselj, coalition partner of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, has taken the helm in this offensive against the arts. Unless one contributes to boosting the image of the Milosevic regime, one runs the risk of being branded unpatriotic and subversive, a terrorist and traitor.

World-renowned film directors Goran Paskaljevic and Srdjan Dragojevic, theatre director Gorcin Stojanovic, leading Serbian actor Milena Dravic, singer Djordje Balasevic and the hugely successful playwright Biljana Srbljanovic - all were exposed to serious threats and insults on a recent state television programme. Their work was dismissed as trash and rubbish, the product of traitors.

Journalists and artists, who would be the pride of any other country, are declared enemies of the state. But the Milosevic system needs enemies like a man needs air. Manufacturing enemies is a highly developed industry in Serbia.

This fashion for uncovering conspiracies began several months ago with the revelations that two terrorist-subversive organisations, Osa (Wasp) and Pauk (Spider), had been unmasked and disabled. Both groups, made up mostly of Yugoslav citizens, were accused of plotting an assassination attempt against Milosevic.

But interestingly the groups were also accused of crimes committed during the recent wars on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Pauk was accused of the Srebrenica massacres and Osh of crimes against Albanian civilians in Kosovo. The state it seems no longer wishes to deny these crimes took place - a novelty for the Serbian public - but now seeks to attribute these offences to paramilitary groups sent in by foreign intelligence services to reek havoc and discredit the Belgrade regime.

Then, just as the election campaign kicked off, we had the arrests of international "spies" in Montenegro. Yugoslavia is isolated economically and politically, the economy crippled, and the Milosevic government more unpopular than at any time in its ten year history. Against such a background the arrests in early August sent out a clear message - the election represents an open confrontation between patriots (Milosevic and his supporters) and NATO's traitorous servants (the political opposition, the independent media and intellectuals).

The arrests of the tourist-spies from Holland, Britain, Canada and Slovenia in Montenegro served to reinforce the claims of foreign conspiracies and to discredit the anti-Milosevic, "pro-West" government of Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic.

The arrests demonstrated to Djukanovic and the Montenegrin authorities that no one could move around the republic without a visa issued in Belgrade. Montenegro had previously abolished tourist visas. The message was clear - all power is concentrated at the federal level, under the control of Milosevic's Socialist Party of Serbia and Mrs Milosevic's Yugoslav Left.

Even though the detained Dutchmen's alleged plot to assassinate Milosevic verged on the comic, the Serbian government appears to count on at least some television viewers and readers believing the state media reports.

The dominance of hate speech calls into serious question the chances of any elections in Serbia being free and fair. For some in the ruling oligarchy, victory in the September 24 polls is a matter of survival. Defeat could open the door to The Hague Tribunal. Requests for the extradition of those accused of war crimes - including Milosevic - would surely follow.

Indeed the stakes are so high very few in Serbia trust in a fair outcome on September 24. Even if the elections are conducted fairly and the opposition pull off a win, the likelihood of a peaceful handover of power remains in doubt.

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